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The Seal of the Confessional: Robert Lepage's Le Confessionnal in Social and Cultural Context

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Abstract
The Quiet Revolution brought an end to Catholic hegemony in Québec culture and society. Despite the Church's fall from power, Catholicism did not disappear from Québec society after the Quiet Revolution. The continued importance of Catholicism in conjunction with the dramatic shift to secular institutions and values creates a palpable tension in Québec public and private life. One film that explores this tension explicitly is the 1995 drama, *Le Confessionnal*. The film was written and directed by Robert Lepage, one of Québec's, and Canada's, most versatile artists. This article explores the primary existential theme -- the relationship between the Catholic past (1952) and the secular present (1989) – by examining plot, character, and symbolism, particularly the use of color. Just as the main characters cannot escape their family history, so too, the film implies, must Québec come to terms with its past, within which the Catholic Church played such an important role.

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Québec is unique among Canada's ten provinces in that it has its own distinct language – French – and its distinct identity. From its 17th century origins until the 1960s, this identity was heavily marked by Catholicism. Not only were most Québecois born and raised as Catholics, but the Catholic Church controlled major public institutions, including the educational and health care systems. This situation changed abruptly in the decade between 1960-1970. This period, called the Quiet Revolution, saw the dramatic rise of the Québec separatist movement, and secularization of all public institutions, and of the majority of the Québec population.[1]

The Quiet Revolution brought an end to Catholic hegemony in Québec culture and society (Charron, 1996). No longer would the Catholic Church control public life (Froger, 2009), nor would it remain the arbiter of morality, propriety, and law in such areas as marriage, divorce, sexuality, birth control (Gauvreau, 2005; 2007) and film censorship (Lever, 2008). So swift and widespread was the process of secularization that within a mere five decades, Québec "went from being one of the most socially traditional, politically conservative, and religiously devout regions of the developed world to one of the least" (Christiano, 2007: 21) as "vast numbers of Catholics…shed the faith of their ancestors" (Baum, 1991: 24).

Power structures and governments, however, can change more quickly than people do. Despite the Church's fall from power, Catholicism did not disappear from Québec society after the Quiet Revolution. According to the National Household Survey 2011 (Government of Canada, 2003), almost 75% of Québec's population self-identifies as

[1] For background regarding the Quiet Revolution, see Gauvreau, 2005.

Catholic. Although this marks a decrease from just under 84% in 2001, the actual number of residents identifying as Catholic between 2001-2011 is almost identical; the percentage decrease reflects the increase in the province's non-Catholic immigrant population. Although regular church attendance declined dramatically since the Quiet Revolution, a significant percentage of Québec residents engage in Catholic life-cycle rituals and profess faith in specifically Catholic doctrines (Christiano, 2007; Bibby, 2012).

Nor did Catholic buildings and symbols disappear from public life. Churches, crucifixes, and shrines are still prominent in Québec cityscapes. Despite the thorough and often vociferous commitment to secularism, prominent monuments such as the cross on the top of Mount Royal and on the wall of the National are maintained, on the debatable grounds that these are cultural objects rather than religious ones (Brodeur & Turp, 2006; Peritz & Perreaux, 2013).

The ongoing presence of Catholic symbols, rituals, and institutions in Québec private and public life suggests that the Catholic Church remains a powerful force (Beaman, 2012; Charron, 1996; Rousseau, 2012). Indeed, some would contend that the Québécois "demonstrate a marked schizophrenia to their Catholic past," given that most secularists "nevertheless embrace that Catholicism as an important part of their cultural heritage…."(Adelman & Anctil, 2011: 109).

The continued importance of Catholicism in conjunction with the dramatic shift to secular institutions and values creates a palpable tension in Québec public and private life. Indeed, in the years since the Quiet Revolution, Québec society has been engaged in an emotional debate about how to live as a secular society without erasing its own Catholic heritage and history. The media, which had an instrumental role in the Quiet Revolution

(Totaro, 2005), is one of the most important arenas in which this debate takes place. Québecois are avid consumers of Québec television, newspapers, journals and radio. They are also avid filmgoers, not only of American Hollywood productions, but of Québecois cinema. At least 70% of Québecois moviegoers view Québécois films at least once, and often many more times, per year (Audet et al., 2010), suggesting that such films speak convincingly to the realities, concerns and preoccupations of Québec society (Loiselle, 2006). For these reasons, cinema is an important vehicle for addressing the tension between Québec's Catholic past and its secular present.

Le Confessionnal

One film that explores this tension explicitly is the 1995 drama, *Le Confessionnal*. The film was written and directed by Robert Lepage, one of Québec's, and Canada's, most versatile artists. Lepage is a well-known playwright, director, actor, and entrepreneur; he is also a public intellectual who speaks out regularly on many issues pertaining to Québec's cultural heritage.

Le Confessionnal is set in Québec City, and moves back and forth between two eras: 1989 and 1952. The central character, Pierre Lamontagne (Lothaire Bluteau) returns to the city in 1989, after three years studying painting in China, to bury his father, Paul-Émile Lamontagne, who has died from untreated diabetes. As he settles in to his parents' empty apartment, he reflects back on a series of events that occurred before he was born. 1952 was the year that his parents moved into the apartment. As Pierre recounts in the film's first scene, the move coincided with several important developments for the city,

and indeed, the province, as a whole: the advent of television, the reelection of Maurice Duplessis as premier of the province of Québec, and the presence of Alfred Hitchcock and his entourage, for the filming of Hitchcock's 1953 thriller, *I Confess*, set in the Church of Saint Zepherin de Stadacona and the streets of the city.[2]

Only Pierre and his cousin André show up in this same church in 1989 for the funeral of Pierre's father. Missing is Pierre's adopted brother Marc. Pierre and Marc are not in regular contact; Pierre must search him out. After he finds Marc in a gay bathhouse, Pierre learns about Marc's complicated life: Marc has a son with his ex-girlfriend, Manon, a stripper and lapdancer, and he has a sexual partner – whether lover or "john" is unclear – named Monsieur Massicotte, a wealthy businessman and politician with business and personal connections in Japan.

Marc seems adrift and directionless, motivated by only one goal: to learn the identity of his biological father. Marc's mother was Pierre's teenage aunt Rachel. Rachel died shortly after Marc was born and as a result he was adopted by Pierre's parents. Rachel never revealed the identity of the father and as far as the brothers knew, the identity was also not known to the Lamontagnes, Marc's adoptive parents and Pierre's biological parents. Pierre joins Marc in his quest to discover the truth of the events that occurred in 1952. This quest constitutes the main plot line of the film.

This plot, however, is simply a vehicle for a broader existential theme: the relationship between past and present. The theme is introduced in the opening scene. As the camera pans over the expanse of the Pont de Québec (the Québec bridge) and then zooms in on a typical residential street in Québec City, Pierre, in voiceover narration,

[2] For analysis of Hitchcock's film, see, for example, Vest, 2011: 367–86.

describes "the city where I was born" as a place where "the past carries the present like a child on its shoulders."[3] The surface of the narrative focuses on the ways in which this theme plays out in the personal lives of the main characters, particularly with regard to Pierre's brother Marc's search for the identity of his father. But just beneath the surface lies concern about the relationship between past and present for the "city where I was born," and for Québec as a whole.

The Plot

The plot of *Le Confessionnal* plays on the plot of the Hitchcock movie *I Confess.*[4] Hitchcock (Ron Burrage) and his beautiful blond assistant (Kristin Scott Thomas) are characters within the 1952 strand of Lepage's film, and key clips from *I Confess* are shown within *Le Confessionnal*, in several scenes that depict the film's Québec premiere.

Both *I Confess* and *Le Confessionnal* are mystery or suspense films. The central mystery in *I Confess* is a murder. Otto Keller, a German refugee who is the caretaker of the church, murders a rich man late one evening. He then returns to the church and formally confesses his crime to the young priest, Father Logan. Keller then frames Father Logan for the crime. Unable, or unwilling, to break the "seal of the confessional," Logan refuses to name Keller even during his own murder trial. He is finally acquitted due to lack of evidence, but suspicion still surrounds him. In the end, Keller's wife Alma cannot abide the lies they have told. Keller shoots her before she can name him as the murderer, but the

[3] The film is in French; English translations are transcribed by the author from the film (for English dialogue) or from the subtitles (French dialogue).
[4] For a detailed, and highly critical, analysis of Lepage's use of Hitchcock's film, see Orr, 2005.

police now know the truth. Keller tries to shoot Logan; a police sharp shooter kills Keller, and Logan's name is cleared.

By contrast, the central crime in Lepage's film is not murder but adultery of a particularly hurtful type. As in *I Confess*, the crime is confessed in the confessional box to a young priest who refuses to divulge it. But in contrast to *I* Confess, which reveals its secret to the film audience in the very first scene, *Le Confessionnal* does not divulge the nature of the crime -- the solution to the mystery – until its penultimate scene. The secret burdens characters and viewers alike, as the events of the past seep relentlessly into the open wound of the present.

The Seal of the Confessional

Both *I Confess* and *Le Confessionnal* revolve around the "seal of the confessional." This term refers to the absolute prohibition of priests to divulge what they hear in the confessional box, even in cases where a person confesses to a serious crime or to an action that will cause grievous harm to themselves or others. While a priest may encourage a penitent to submit him or herself to the authorities, to undergo treatment, or take any other course of action, he cannot require them to do so, and he cannot himself intervene in a given situation.[5]

Hitchcock's film features a single confessional box: the church confessional in which Keller confessed his crime to Logan. Lepage's film, by contrast, has numerous confessionals. The film is replete with small closed off spaces in which secretive acts take

[5] For a detailed examination of the history of this practice, see Keenan, 2010.

place: the church confessional box – the very same box that appears in Hitchcock's movie given that both are filmed in the same church -- but also the apartment with its many rooms and dark hallways; cubicles -- in the gay bathhouse where men sit and wait for "service" from paid personnel and in the striptease club where lapdancers entertain their clients – and, above all, cars, or rather, limousines.[6] It is in a limousine that Mr. Massicotte reveals to Marc in 1989 that he was a former priest, indeed, the very priest to whom Marc's mother had revealed her secret so many years ago. And it is in the limousine in which Pierre's father drives Hitchcock to his hotel in 1952, tells him a story, and in so doing finally reveals the secret to us viewers. That the seal of the confessional is broken in limousines, that is, in closed spaces that travel from one place to another, may be symbolic; only when the secret is revealed is it possible to move forward into the present, even if not all the characters can finally do so.

Breaking the Seal of the Confessional

In the 1989 limousine scene, Massicotte takes Marc's hand and tells him that "there is something that you need to know," and then pulls down the barrier between the passenger seat and the front seat, and thereby excludes not only the limousine driver but also us viewers from the conversation.

In the 1952 scene, the film's penultimate sequence, Alfred Hitchcock climbs into the limousine driven by Paul-Émile Lamontagne, at the end of a day of shooting. After

[6] On the multiple confessional boxes in this film, see Cornelius, 2008.

some pleasantries, Lamontagne offers Hitchcock a story that might serve as the basis of a new suspense movie.

> It's the story of a couple. The wife is very unhappy because they haven't had any children, so she doesn't feel like a real woman. So one day she asks her younger sister to come and live with them. The wife, she's always sick and depressed, but the young sister, she is very beautiful and full of life. So the man tries to resist her, but he can't. So they fall in love. But the problem is that soon after, she…she becomes pregnant. They are desperate because they don't want to hurt the wife, so they try to disguise the situation and make it look like it's another man who is the father. When the child is born, the younger sister, she…she cannot bear the guilt, so she kills herself.

Hitchcock asks: "But what happens to the man?" Lamontagne continues: "Well, he just can't bring himself to love this child, so when he sees all the suffering he has caused he plucks his eyes out." "That's not a suspense story, it's a Greek tragedy," responds Hitchcock. The tragedy in question is Oedipus Rex, by Sophocles.

The secret is now out: Marc's biological father was the senior Lamontagne, who entered a secret liaison with his sister-in-law, the young and beautiful Rachel. Although this relationship did not constitute incest in the technical sense (Paul- Émile and Rachel were not biologically related) it was a source of tremendous pain and guilt. The parallel between their affair and the story Lamontagne told Hitchcock is not apt in any direct sense; Lamontagne dies a natural, if premature, death, and not at the hands of his son(s). On a

symbolic level, however, the sons' efforts to ignore or suppress the past may be seen as an obliteration of all that their father and his generation represented.

Past and Present

As we have seen, the tangled relationship between past and present is announced in Pierre's opening voiceover: "In the city of my birth, the past carries the present like a child on its shoulders." It is also articulated emphatically by Marc's ex-girlfriend, Manon. Manon treats everyone with callous indifference, except for her child, whose juvenile diabetes she manages expertly and with love. Pierre has come to ask her for a photo album given to her by Marc, in the hope that it will provide a lead in the search for Marc's father. Pierre does not initially realize that Marc is the father of Manon's boy. "He never said," Pierre apologizes. Manon ignites with anger, her decibel level rising with each sentence: "He couldn't give a shit….He acts like the child doesn't exist. He doesn't understand that a kid needs a father! That to know where you're going in life you have to know where you're from!" In her tirade, Manon has put her finger precisely on the problem: Marc is unable to live like a full human being in the present because he is ignorant of his past.

Symbols of Past and Present

The theme of past and present pervades the film, not only in the dialogue but also in the colour, characters, and editing style.

Colour

When Pierre arrives at his parents' deserted apartment, the cream-coloured wall of the sitting room still bears the old family photographs. Pierre paints and repaints the wall; indeed, he is never seen doing anything but painting and repainting the wall, unless it is resting briefly before painting again. This painting is not an artistic endeavor of the sort one might have expected given his three years of art study in China. Rather, the painting is Pierre's determined effort to cover up the pale traces of the past by painting them over with a vivid red. Strong as the colour red is, the yellow stains left behind by the old photographs refuse to disappear; they continue to show through despite many coats of paint. On the advice of his cousin Andre, Pierre paints the wall green – red's complementary colour – and then blue. Only thus will the stains of the past no longer show through.

Yellow and red appear elsewhere in the film. After their initial reunion in the bathhouse, the brothers go for a drink in the revolving restaurant at the top of a downtown skyscraper. Marc orders a yellow beverage – beer or hard cider -- and Pierre orders red wine. Marc has his drink but Pierre does not partake of his wine. Instead, he uses it to draw the Chinese characters that make up their surname, Lamontagne, on a napkin in order to show his brother, and then abruptly leaves when he is overcome by vertigo.[7] If yellow represents the past, as Pierre's painting problems suggest, then Marc is still drinking it in; Pierre prefers the present – red walls and red wine, perhaps even red China – but has been

[7] Pierre's vertigo is essential for the theme of the film, in which the hereditary nature of diabetes plays a vital role. But it also pays homage to yet another Hitchcock thriller, *Vertigo* (1958), in which dizziness and death are closely related.

drawn back into the past by his return to his parents' home, and commitment to helping Marc.

Characterization: Diabetes

The inability of the present to escape the past is symbolized by a trait shared by the male members of the Lamontagne family: diabetes or the predisposition towards diabetes. The hereditary nature of this disease provides incontrovertible evidence that Paul-Émile Lamontagne is indeed the biological father of both Pierre and Marc. The elder Lamontagne had gone blind and then died of diabetes which he had refused to treat, perhaps in willful penance for the pain and suffering that he had caused his family as suggested in the story he told Hitchcock. As we have seen, his son Pierre suffers from bouts of vertigo, an early sign of diabetes. While his father may have deliberately avoided treatment, Pierre downplays his vertigo, though he does not ignore it entirely. Marc's status is unknown, but as his son has diabetes, it is likely that he does as well. According to Massicotte, Marc had refused to be tested. Had he done so, he may have suspected the truth of his own past much earlier.

For this family, diabetes is the link that connects fathers and sons. For the elder Lamontagne diabetes is fatal; for Marc and Pierre potentially so. But perhaps not for Marc's young son, whose mother has not only sought diagnosis but also treatment. The boy may yet live. The present rests on the shoulders of the past, and the future all the more so. The heritage of this young child is deeply flawed, but it has not been sealed in secrecy

or denial. Knowledge of the past opens the door to managing the present, and moving towards the future.

Massicotte

The film also contains a concrete, non-symbolic connection between past and present: the figure of Monsieur Massicotte himself. As the young priest who heard Rachel's confession in 1952, and the aging and hedonistic businessman and politician who manipulates both Marc and Pierre in 1989, Massicotte is the only character who has agency in both chronological frames (Marc too appears in both eras but he was a newborn in 1952). The film hints that, like Logan in Hitchcock's *I Confess*, the young Massicotte was suspected of committing the act that the seal of the confessional forbade him to discuss. The film does not, however, reveal how Massicotte met up with Marc. Was it coincidence, or did the former priest seek out the son of his deceased penitent?

In the film as a whole, Massicotte may seem like a minor player, certainly not as important as Pierre, Marc, the elder Lamontagnes and Rachel. But in point of fact he holds the key not only to the secret of Marc's parentage but also to Marc's well-being. Maintaining the seal of the confessional long after he himself had left the priesthood gave him power over Marc, even if Marc did not yet realize it. In withholding Marc's past from him, he has made it impossible for Marc to live productively in the present. Indeed, Massicotte provides the clearest illustration of the danger of suppressing the past. Where once he was a priest, presumably motivated by a genuine vocation or calling, he now lives an unanchored life, living in hotels and buying sex while hoping for love. While he may

have hoped that divulging the secret would intensify his hold on Marc, he loses him to suicide.

Editing

The past's resistance to suppression in the present is also expressed in the film's distinctive editing style. The use of flashbacks, or the toggling between two eras, is a common device in narrative film. But in contrast to many films, *Le Confessionnal* does not provide clear transitions between one era and the other. Rather, the editing is seamless; it leaves us chronologically disoriented for the few moments of any given scene, unsure whether we are in 1952 or in 1989. This effect is most acute in the scenes that take place in the apartment itself, which is a major setting for both time frames.

In one 1952 scene, for example, Rachel steps into the bathroom, opens the medicine cabinet, and contemplates her brother-in-law's sharp razor. Immediately the camera closes in on the bright white sink as a deep red liquid swirls down the drain.[8] It appears that the unhappy Rachel has slit her wrists. But no. A moment later a hand appears, holding a paintbrush under the tap. Only now do we realize that the red liquid is not blood but Pierre's paint. This moment not only hints at Rachel's state of mind, but also alludes to two other blood-soaked scenes. Early in the film, Paul-Émile shaves in the mirror as his wife bathes in the tub. They playfully splash each other, but the play stops as the bathwater reddens with Françoise's blood: she is miscarrying. Towards the end of the film, Marc uses a similar-looking razor to slit his own wrists, inadvertently echoing his mother's secretive

[8] This brief image may be an allusion to the famous shower scene in Hitchcock's film Psycho (1960).

behaviour (Marshall, 2001: 309). But where she stepped back from the brink on this occasion, he does not. He sinks into the bath; the water turns red.

A second disorienting apartment scene also links Rachel in 1952 with Pierre in 1989. This scene takes place shortly after Rachel has given birth to Marc. On a dark night, Rachel slips on her coat, pauses to listen to her baby's cry, and hurries out the door. At the moment the door shuts behind her, Pierre walks from one room to another through that same hallway, grabbing a can of paint as he goes. We then see Rachel hurry across the Québec bridge. Soon she will be gone. The film then toggles between Marc's suicide in 1989, his mother's suicide in 1952, and the filming of *I Confess* in the church. As the director says, "And cut" in 1952, Marc in 1989 draws the razor across his wrist and lies down in the warm bath.

This blending of the two eras emphasizes the contrast between them – as in the sequences that juxtapose the full church of 1952 and the empty church of 1989 – but even more forcefully stresses the continuity between past and present. As Erin Manning comments, the past "haunts" the present in a way that resists the characters' attempt to create a clear break between past and present (Manning, 1998: 50).

Death and Life

Both Marc and his mother are paralyzed by the past, and unable to live in the present, let alone envisage a future. Pierre's status is less clear. His three-year sojourn in China implies that he has moved forward with his life. But his spells of vertigo, and the apparent absence of any adult non-family relationships, suggests that he too is held back by the past.

By the end of the film, however, it seems that he has integrated the past into his present. The secrets have been revealed, the seal of the confessional broken. Pierre acknowledges the past and takes responsibility for the future by taking on the care of his young nephew.

Yet the film leaves us uncertain and worried about what the future holds for Pierre, his nephew, and the province of Québec. The final scene repeats the opening scene, bringing us full circle and creating a sense of both closure and ambiguity. The camera pans over the Québec Bridge. The day is sunny. The bridge stretches invitingly from one side of the St. Lawrence River to the other. But this iteration, in contrast to the first, has an ominous undertone. As Pierre and his nephew approach the bridge, the camera focuses on a sign that warns: "Danger. Do not Trespass." Pierre ignores the sign, and takes his nephew's hand to cross the bridge. The camera shows them from behind as they set out. Pierre's hair is now long, as Marc's had been, and he wears Marc's yellow leather jacket. The child is wearing a yellow and red T-shirt, recalling the symbolic roles that these colours play elsewhere in the film. As they approach from the right hand side of the frame, Pierre reassures his nephew: "We're almost home." He then suggests, "Let's play tightrope." He picks the young child up and begins to walk gingerly along the bridge's rail. "Scared?" Pierre asks. "I won't let you fall."

The child trusts Pierre, and we viewers want to trust him too. But we have also noticed the warning sign posted by the bridge, and, more gravely, we are aware of the occasional vertigo that Pierre himself has yet to take seriously. We never learn whether they made it across the bridge's great expanse, for they soon disappear to the left of the frame, as the camera continues to pan across the bridge to the other side. We may take

reassurance from the absence of sound: no splash is heard. Yet how well would one hear it from the other side of the bridge?

On the one hand, the bridge implies the continuity between past and present, and the resolution of tension between these two states. This sense of continuity is reinforced by the warmth that Pierre shows his brother's son. As Cornelius comments, "the possibility of crossing the bridge suggests hope for completion"(Cornelius, 2008: 122). Their trip across the bridge could therefore imply a successful resolution between past and present, and a successful journey into the future. The same is suggested by the presence of both yellow and red – past and present – on the child's shirt.

On the other hand, the danger sign, unheeded by Pierre, signals to the viewer that the journey may yet founder. In this final scene, Pierre walks a "tightrope between life and death" (Marshall, 2001: 308) and takes the trusting and unwitting child along with him. And yet, there is cause for hope. It is not only Pierre, but every one of us who walks a tightrope between life and death, whether intentionally, as Pierre seems to be doing here, or not. Pierre is risking that he and the child will fall, but his manner suggests that he expects to live. This bridge is like life itself: risks may fail but without risk we remain mired in the past.

A second point of optimism emerges from outside the world of the film. In "La première confession de Robert Lepage," the filmmaker confesses that there is a degree of autobiography in this film, as there is in much of his work (cf. Cornelius, 2008, p. 118): "The two brothers, Pierre and Marc, are two aspects of my personality. These are two

different searches, two different ways. Instead of making one character, I divided him into two" (Caron, 1995: 27).[9]

This comment raises the intriguing possibility that the final scene, while ambiguous and, quite literally, dizzying, also represents the reunification of the two personae into one character, as the cinematic signature of the filmmaker himself. In having Pierre take on Marc's son, Marc's haircut, and Marc's leather jacket, Lepage is suggesting a melding of their two personae. While this integration may cause concern that Pierre will also take on Marc's state of being paralyzed by the past, Lepage's own comments draw attention to the contradictions that are simply a part of every human being.

If so, the final scene is more optimistic than pessimistic, for it envisions the integration of past and present, Pierre and Marc, and perhaps even Catholicism and secularism, into a single whole that, despite the past, is capable of living in the present and moving towards a future. This integration of personality may be seen in Pierre's confrontation with Massicotte. No longer will the Lamontagne brothers give in to this hedonistic bully. Pierre demands, and receives, a tidy sum towards the care of Marc's young son.

The integration may also be seen in the colour progression on the living room wall that Pierre paints and repaints. Following his cousin's advice, Pierre has painted the wall green and then blue. Blue, in contrast to red, is a peaceful colour, strong but not strident; it echoes the blue of the St. Lawrence River that is spanned by the Québec bridge. Erin Manning comments that: "With the advent of green and blue at the end of the film, it is therefore not so much that red and yellow have disappeared, but rather that an alternative

[9] The translation is mine.

to red and yellow as the dominating colours has emerged. With the complementarity of blue and green, filiation is displaced and a different (hi)story can emerge" (Manning, 1998: 60).

Beyond the Personal

Le Confessionnal is not just a narrative about the devastating impact of the confessional seal on individual identity. It is also a commentary on Québec society, including history, culture, and religion. As Manning notes, "The secret of the confessional [is] as much about the legacy of the past of a nation as it [is] about the name of a father"(Manning, 1998: 59; see also Dunđerović, 2003: 54; Clandfield, 2003:7).

The personal and the broader societal dimensions of the film are established in Pierre's opening voiceover. Québec is the city where he was born, and the story is a family history. But it is also the place where television arrived, Duplessis extended his leadership, and Hitchcock shot his film. These developments affected individuals, to be sure, but even more so Québec society as a whole.

Television brought America and English Canada to the province; television provided Quebeckers with a glimpse of Anglophone North America. Hitchcock's sojourn also brought a healthy dose of American sensibilities. But filming *I Confess* in Québec City also meant that Hitchcock brought that city back to his American audiences, and helped pave the way for American tourism. The city and province of Québec were exotic artifacts, strange French-speaking Catholic places that refused to be swallowed up by the language and culture of the majority in North America even as they were fascinating and attractive

to that majority. And Duplessis' election extended the period of *La Grande Noirceur* (The Great Darkness) that allowed conservative religious and political forces to maintain their hold on all aspects of life, and thereby to say no to the winds of change that threatened to escape the world of television and cinema and infect the people themselves.

These three developments contain the seeds of the tension between past and present that is the main theme of *Le Confessionnal*. On the narrative level, neither past nor present is very appealing in this film. The past is "priest-ridden, pious, but hypocritical" and the present is devoted to "commercialism, hedonism, and moral fragmentation" (Marshall, 2001: 306; Orr, 2005 :177). While 1989 may seem like an improvement over 1952 at least with regard to sexuality – Marc can now live openly as a bisexual man – none of the 1989 characters, perhaps with the exception of the dull cousin André, leads a happy or productive life. Perhaps there is a third way.

The incursion of television and Hollywood hints at the beginning of the desires and aspirations that paved the way for the Quiet Revolution and Québecois nationalism -- the separatist movement -- that would erupt once Duplessis was finally out of office in 1959 (Gagnon, 1997). If nationalism is a thread in almost all facets of Québec culture, it is religion that predominates in this film. The "seal of the confessional" and its attendant secrecy and guilt take their toll not just for the individual penitents inside the confessional box but for everyone around them. In what way does the Catholic past prior to the Quiet Revolution carry the secular present on its shoulders? Is this simply an acknowledgement of the ongoing influence of Catholicism even in the face of Québec's radical secularism?

The question is posed indirectly through the use of colours, which are important not only the level of the personal narrative, but on the broader societal level as well. As Erin Manning notes, "Yellow acts as the stain of a conservative nationalism which marks the norms in a community that believes it has discarded the oppression of religion…Because it seeps through the red into the green and blue, yellow is by far the more threatening colour, a colour that demonstrates how difficult the transition into the secular is for a society that has based its cultural practices on the conservative discourse of the Catholic church" (Manning, 1998: 54).

The film does not provide a direct answer to the question of exactly how the present must integrate the past. If, however, the past is the foundation of the present – carrying the present like a child on its shoulders – then perhaps the important thing is to acknowledge and accept a past that is dominated by Catholicism, but not to be bound to reproduce the past. While the present has the past as its foundation, it nevertheless must break the seal of the confessional and break free from the hold that the Church had on the province and its residents alike. Without these acts of liberation, the province, like Marc and Rachel, is paralyzed and cannot live fully in the present moment or move on to a productive future.

Lepage's own views on religion are complex. He asserts that the tenets of Catholicism are no longer tenable in the present secular age. At the same time, he believes that in their rush to overthrow Catholic hegemony, people have forgotten the Church's important role as the cultural caretaker, and the vehicle of culture. By suppressing religion so thoroughly, Québec, like Oedipus, has inadvertently killed the "father" (Caron, 1995: 28).

Just as Pierre cannot escape his own family history, so too, the film implies, must Québec come to terms with its past, within which the Catholic Church played such an important part in ways that are both obvious – architecturally, for example – and less so, in the values and behaviours that it encouraged and reinforced.

Whether Québec will cross the bridge to the other side without falling still remains to be seen. Those of us who enjoy and care about its ongoing vitality will hope that the province and the people, like Pierre Lamontagne and his nephew, will find a way to integrate past and present in a way that makes a productive and vibrant future possible.

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